Gender

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Introducing Gender

In 2009 middle distance South African runner Caster Semenya underwent gender testing by the International Association of Athletics Federations. The extensive media coverage of this issue and subsequent change in how the Olympic committee measured gender (from DNA to testosterone levels) highlights some important issues for critical psychologists interested in gender: it shows us how much we normally take gender and sex categorisations for granted; how fascinating we find those that we can't easily categorise as male or female; and how complex and changeable these categorisations are when we try to define them.

To think through these complexities we draw on social constructionist and poststructuralist theoretical frameworks. We employ these frameworks to think about gender in two related bodies of research, on 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'postfeminism'. In the process we consider contemporary gender relations in the globalised west, including issues of equality, sexism, and new consumer-oriented ways of thinking about masculinity and femininity.

Critical gender research is often interdisciplinary and this chapter is no exception. Our focus is on sharing with you research by critical social psychologists or which has informed critical social psychology, and that means drawing on work outside of psychology, including sociology, cultural and media studies. We also use Youtube videos to help you think through these ideas and make the link between theory and practice.

Gender as something we are: Critiques of mainstream social psychology

Historically psychology can be thought of as employing a 'male as norm' framework, conducting 'male-stream' psychology in which research was (in general) conducted by men, on men, for men and from a male perspective (these men were usually middle class and white). The male-as-norm framework set the scene in the development of early psychometric testing. For example, the Attitude Interest Analysis Survey gave a positive score if you were more likely to agree to items endorsed by men than women, while the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory developed its measure of femininity through testing homosexual identified men (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001).

Trying to address these biases, feminist psychologists re-evaluated female traits. For example, Gilligan (1982) rejected Kohlberg's finding that women were less likely to reach the highest level of moral thinking by arguing that men and women had different but equal moral reasoning. This 'equal but different' approach reproduced the idea that men and women were essentially different and that these differences were related to biology, in particular that women gave birth and were normally the subsequent primary carers. In contrast, other analysts made a distinction between sex (biologically determined) and gender (socially determined). The distinction between gender and sex was a useful tool in the battle against sexism. For example, Sandra Bem (1974) argued against work that devalued traits considered feminine by arguing that psychologically healthy people had a balance of both masculinity and femininity.

But, the gender/sex distinction came with its own problems. It assumed there were essential, objective truths of maleness and femaleness there to be discovered in men and women's bodies. Despite Bem's work, this standpoint facilitated an understanding that masculinity and femininity should map onto male and female bodies, creating prescriptive expectations that men should articulate masculine behaviours and women feminine ones. We see this logic in the way men who seek gender reassignment surgery must demonstrate their commitment to being a woman through maintaining a highly feminine appearance (Speer & Green, 2007).

Another problem with the gender/sex distinction is that it allows arguments that uphold social inequalities. For example, essentialist arguments about women's biology were used historically to deny women access to education (increased blood flow to the brain would deprive the womb of blood, making women infertile and therefore less 'womanly' [Theriot, 1993]), while more recently the argument that men's natural aggressiveness makes them likely to be higher earners has been used to position legislation for equal pay as discriminatory (Fausto-Stirling, 2003).

The gender/sex distinction also masks variation in how we might think about biological sex differences. The idea of two biological sex categories is questionable given that estimates of live births that cannot clearly be categorised as male or female vary from 1.7% - 10% (Blackless et al., 2000; Butler, 1990). There are also different ways of making sense of our biological bodies; for example, before the 18th Century males and females were considered as having the same genitals (just on the inside or outside) (Laqueur, 1990).

Conceptualising two sexes and two genders is a form of dichotomous thinking, and in dichotomous thinking, one side of a dichotomy (e.g. white/black, good/bad, male/female) is usually more valued (see Hepburn, 2003 discussion of Derrida). We can see this thinking in the way traits traditionally associated with masculinity (e.g. agentic, strong, independent) are considered better than those associated with femininity (passive, weak, dependent etc.). This thinking has real world implications. For example, Rosalind Gill's

(1993) interviews with 1990s radio DJs showed how male broadcasters constructed women's voices as problematic (e.g. too shrill), and thus differences in men and women's voice quality (and not the implicit sexism of the 'liberal' media industry) justified the lack of women employed in radio broadcasting. Gill's research described a form of sexism that incorporated cultural changes that value equality. In 'new sexism', people claim an egalitarian identity while arguing in ways that legitimised prejudice and discrimination against women (also see Gough [1998] and Riley [2001]). Other examples of contemporary sexism include idolising femininity. For example, female criminals may receive harsher judgements because their participation in crime is understood as unfeminine (Viki, Massey & Masser 2005).

Thinking through the lens of gender can mean we treat gender as a universally shared experience and miss the very different gendered experiences for people of different ethnicities, sexualities, classes and with different levels of able-bodiedness or incomes. From this perspective, intersectional researchers challenged sex/gender research for failing to see how issues other than gender impact on people's lives (for more on intersectionality, see Bowleg, this volume). For example, while Betty Friedian's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) highlighted the limitations of a suburban housewife's life, her ideas were developed from the experiences of white middle class women, ignoring the experience of many women, often less wealthy and non-white, who were in paid employment. McCall (2005) showed the importance of an intersectional perspective when she demonstrated how different patterns of inequality occur between men and women depending on education, ethnicity, geography, and underlying local historical economic structures. Her work suggests that to successfully reduce inequality specific policies are needed for different geo-socio-historical contexts.

Critical social psychologists are also concerned with the way mainstream social psychology conceptualises the individual and society as separate entities that then interact. This framework has at times been useful for gender researchers with a critical agenda. For example, by showing that children mimic behaviours that they see are rewarded, Bandura's (1965) Bobo doll experiments provided a theory of gender socialisation. But conceptualising the individual as separate (if affected by) society ties in with the problematisation of the gender/sex dichotomy outlined above, since gender is constructed as something we are, located in individuals of a specific sex who have measurable 'levels' of masculinity and femininity within them. Critical social psychologists instead use a different framework, conceptualising gender as something that we *treat* as real, and people, not as separate entities that interact with their culture, but as produced *through* their culture.

So, where mainstream socialisation theories of gender imply that we start off as individuals who are then moulded by our culture, social constructionist theorists argue that we are born into a world that exists before us and already has concepts for making

sense of the world. We draw on these concepts to make sense of ourselves, so how we develop as individuals is profoundly interconnected with the sense making of our cultures. For example, we may come to understand ourselves as having attitudes because we have the concept and word 'attitude' in our culture, but not every culture does because the concept of attitudes requires an individualistic framework. To explain using a clothing metaphor: socialisation is when your mother puts out your clothes to wear until you learn what is stylish, while social constructionism is when you choose what you like from the wardrobe; you just don't notice that everything in it is a shade of blue. Taking this standpoint means that gender is not understood as something we are, rather it is something done in context.

Doing Gender: Alternative critical perspectives

The importance of conceptualising the person-in-context is central to critical social psychology and a key tenant of social constructionism. Burr (2003), drawing on Gergen (1985), argues that social constructionists share: a critical standpoint towards taken for granted knowledge and an understanding of knowledge as socio-historically located, produced in interaction, and with interactional and material effects, so that knowledge and action go together (see also Burr, this volume). Applying this approach to gender, social constructionists might consider the idea that 'girls love pink' as a culturally accepted idea that can be interrogated by looking at the genealogy of where this idea came from, the discursive, institutional and material conditions that allow it to make sense to us now, how these are reproduced in social interaction and to what effect. In doing so, they could show that in Victorian times pink was considered a boy's colour (pink being linked to a nexus of meanings around red, the planet Mars, war and masculinity). Looking at contemporary sense-making, social constructionists might examine gendered marketing including the rise in 'pinking' products to develop female markets, so that contemporary children and adults must take up, resist or otherwise negotiate an understanding that genders are coloured (see for example, Amazon customer reviews for the pink biro http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/B004FTGJUW).

Social constructionism underpins West and Zimmerman's (1987) argument that gender is something we do rather than something we are. 'Doing gender' is the idea that people are categorised by their sex and learn to act in ways that can be interpreted through cultural understandings of what is appropriate for their sex category. Within western cultures, people are divided into males and females, and in interaction at any time our behaviour may be held to account in terms of how congruent it is with normative conceptions of masculinity or femininity. These concepts are not natural, essential or biological, but are often treated as if they were, and in most contexts we are required to be read as congruent with our sex category or if not, to be accountable for our incongruity in an understandable way. For example, wearing a suit with a tie remains

normatively masculine; a man in this outfit would be congruent with a certain kind of (perhaps professional/conservative) masculinity - a woman wearing it might be read as subversive, playing with masculinity, perhaps to signify her as sexy, lesbian or making a claim to authority. Both are 'doing gender', engaging in an activity (in this case their clothing choices) that can be read through the lens of gender.

Gender is not just a behaviour because to be gendered it needs to be intelligible as a gendered behaviour. Gender is therefore something that we 'do' because it is a practice that reflects or expresses gender which also requires another to make sense of it as gendered. Judith Butler gives an example that we can use to help this make more sense: a young man who 'swished' when he walked was thrown off a bridge and killed because other young men read this walk through the lenses of gender and sexuality. The hip-swishing walk was interpreted as a sign that the young man was gay, and thus in their eyes failing to do gender appropriately. (See Butler talk about this at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLnv322X4tY).

How gender is 'done' is socio-historically specific, since it changes over time and is different across cultures. This suggests that our understanding of gender is not necessarily natural or true, but stems from a cultural agreement of what is true. From this perspective critical social psychologists may ask how some ideas but not others become culturally agreed as true. This is a question of power. And to theorise power we turn to poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism is a theoretical framework for thinking about language, power and truth. At any one time there are multiple ways of understanding an issue and these understandings circulate within communities, particularly through language. In the process some of these understandings are accorded greater veracity than others, so that within a culture they are understood by most people as representing reality. Power is therefore in the process of ideas about the world being accepted as truths about the world.

At certain socio-historic moments, ways of understanding the world emerge that structure our understanding in relatively coherent ways. These 'discursive regimes' produce the ways we understand gender, for example that femininity is associated with emotion, and masculinity with rationality. Discursive regimes are often enabled by institutional support (for example, medicine holds significant power in how we understand sex; see Foucault 1978). In turn, these understandings produce 'subject positions', concepts of the kinds of people who can exist, such as the nurturing mother or the rational male scientist. People may take up and interpret themselves through subject positions, perhaps turning to experts to facilitate this process;for example, psychologists who write parenting books on how to be more nurturing.

However dominant a discursive regime might appear, there are always other ways of making sense of the world, in part because introducing an idea suggests its alternative. Alternative concepts may run in parallel with or directly contest more dominant

understandings (Billig, et al., 1998). For example, conceptualising anorexia as symptomatic of out-of-control femininity opens up the possibility of constructing anorexia as an exemplar of female self-discipline and control (Malson, 1998).

How we experience our gendered subjectivities is thus a complex interaction between the multiple discourses of gender available in our milieu (some of which will have greater cultural credibility and/or institutional support) and how these discourses circulate through the communication and interactions that we experience in our day to day lives. Gender maybe something that we do in interaction, but it is multiple, fluid and dynamic as we and others shift between competing discourses of gender. Conceptualising gender in this way offers a more complex and nuanced theoretical framework than the sex/gender distinction of mainstream psychology. In the sections below we show its application.

One of the Boys

https://youtu.be/EJVt8kUAm9Q

In the music video link above, a young man is told off for being concerned about his male friends showing affection for each other. He should not consider a hug an unwanted homosexual overture, as men in the past may have done. Rather, it's a way men interact with each other called 'bromance', the song explains: "Bromance, nothing really gay about it, not that there's anything wrong with being gay. Bromance, you shouldn't be ashamed or hide it. I love you, in the most heterosexual way"**.** To explain the concept we're shown a range of activities that represent bromance, including playing on swings in the park, looking after each other through traditional heterosexual tribulations (girls not liking you, men wanting to hit you), play fighting and partying together. Practices that might once have symbolised romance and sexual attraction are reconstituted as simple, apparently non-sexual pleasures of heterosexual men who are bonded by friendship. Yet alternative readings run though the video: sexual gyrations, phallic symbols, the suggestion in the lyrics that the love is something else, repetitions of the word 'gay' and a final homophobic moment work to subvert any clear cut interpretation of an inclusive 'bromance' masculinity characterised as heterosexual and non-homophobic. The bromance video is intentionally amusing and a useful way to highlight critical thinking about masculinity that include theories of hegemonic, orthodox, inclusive and multiple masculinities.

In Connell's (1995) influential work on hegemonic masculinity she argued that masculinity was defined as not-female and not-gay, and in hierarchical ways in relation to ethnicity, class and professional status. Thus the most valued forms of masculinity tend to be associated with being heterosexual, white, middle or upper class, able bodied, and employed as elites in professions, politics, sports or business. It was these men who were constituted as most associated with positive masculinity such as leadership, heroism,

strength, rationality, and aggression (when directed in culturally appropriate ways). Hegemonic masculinity is a subject position, but one in dialogue with wider social structures. This also means that hegemonic masculinity is not only about individual men: the father might be the head of the household, but the patriarchal institution of the family places him there, similarly, a businessman may lead a finance sector, but it's a capitalist system that puts men in top positions (Stasi & Evans, 2013).

Connell (1995) and others argued that men learn to do gender so as to be constructed as close to hegemonic masculinity as possible (e.g. Bird, 1996; Budgeon, 2013; Flood 2008). Boys, for example, learn not to cry because displays of emotion are feminine, and femininity associated with homosexuality. The bromance video plays with this concept: the man who finds it inappropriate that his friends try to hug him is making sense of their behaviour within a hegemonic masculinity discourse, where men do not touch each other affectionately for fear of being labelled homosexual. Hegemonic masculinity can therefore be understood as form of socialisation that was damaging to men, denying them, for example, full emotional lives.

Hegemonic masculinity theory challenged taken-for-granted understandings of the essential characteristics of men. The theory emerged during a shift in discursive regimes enabled in part by the discontent of young people at the time with what they saw as repressive social norms. This discontent is evident in the gay, feminist and civil rights movements which in turn framed a developing men's rights movement (Weeks, 2007). These movements were linked to wider discourses around freedom and individualism, and what may be called the psy-complex, a way of thinking psychologically about our lives that made being in touch with your emotions culturally valued (Illouz, 2007).

The challenge to hegemonic masculinity opened up new ways of being. As in the bromance video, behaviours once considered problematically female/gay could become part of a straight man's repertoire. This enabled new subject positions, but ones that were often complex and contradictory. For example, the 'new man' emerged as a media discourse of a man in touch with his emotions, able to take on childcare responsibilities, but ultimately a bit of a wimp. Like 'new sexism' the 'new man' could be read as both incorporating and resisting changes in social values (Gill, 2003).

By the 1980s competing discourses around masculinity, increases in women's employment and decreases in working class male employment through de-industrialisation produced a discourse of concern for men's place in the world known as the 'crisis in masculinity'. Against this backdrop a further important player emerged: consumerism.

Although consumerism had an earlier history, in the 1970s it became central to 'neoliberalism' a political way of managing people that came to dominate how we make sense of ourselves. Neoliberalism originated in economic theory, but developed to redefine citizenship by associating citizenship with a person's right to consume and to

use consumption to produce themselves into their desired selves (for a detailed discussion in relation to gender see Evans & Riley, 2014). Successive neoliberal governments in the UK and elsewhere championed consumer culture which opportunistically engaged with challenges to traditional masculinity by associating consumption with new masculinities. Products were rebranded to associate masculinity with commodity items previously considered 'feminine'. See for example, Kiehl's 'Face Fuel' male product range. Through these changes new subject positions emerged such as the metrosexual: a heterosexual, urban man who takes care of his appearance through the consumption of grooming products.

In analysing the outcomes of these cultural shifts in masculinity, researchers have highlighted complex and contradictory requirements for men. For example, that men must be appearance-conscious but also not vain (Gill, 2008). Or how men distance themselves from the fashionista 'metrosexual' male, but look favourably on the fashion-oriented performances of gangsta rappers, because they are seen as successfully attracting women (Pompper, 2010).

Researchers too are unresolved as to the impact of new masculinities. Some argue that homophobia has significantly declined since boys and men are less concerned about performing masculinities in line with Connell's (1995) description of hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2009). For Anderson, a shift occurred from traditional, 'orthodox' masculinities (what might be read as Connell's hegemonic masculinity) to 'inclusive' masculinities, which, like those represented in the bromance video, involve the social inclusion of gay peers, emotional intimacy, physical tactility and the take up of practices that had previously been problematically associated with femininity/homosexuality, such as care of appearance.

Other academics have argued that rather than see a clear transition from orthodox to inclusive masculinities men may only partially take up inclusive masculinities or shift between masculinities so that both inclusive and orthodox masculinities are part of a repertoire of available discourses that contemporary men take up in a fluid and dynamic way. For example, Gough, Hall and Seymour-Smith (2014) found that young men who engaged in beauty work undertook only partial engagement with inclusive masculinity "engag[ing] positively with once feminized practices while being careful not to appear too soft, effeminate or gay" (p.110). Similarly, Owen, Riley and Griffin's (in prep) work with men in dance classes showed how participants shifted across a range of masculinities including those associated with orthodox/hegemonic masculinities (evidenced in dancing to meet girls, taking up a subject position of 'English gentleman', and homophobic banter) and inclusive masculinities (wearing tight fitting clothes, sexualised hip movements, dancing with other men for fun).

Stasi and Evans' (2013) research with a gay football team in Iceland showed that despite the Scandinavian cultural valuing of gender equality and an associated decline in homophobia, these footballers shored up masculine capital through, for example,

misogynistic comments about ‘those women’ in government. Furthermore, a cultural acceptance of gender equality (and by extension, of sexual orientation) meant that these men were unable to critically reflect on social and structural homophobia, and so individualised it as something requiring mental health and counselling services.

Thus although it is clear that cultural change has created an expanded range of masculinities, there is concern over the celebratory nature of inclusive masculinity theory. Hegemonic masculinity theory assumes what is dominant is likely to change, since it is dependent on history, society and context, and in the same way analysts identified ‘new sexism’ in apparently egalitarian talk, so O’Neill (2015), for example, has critiqued inclusive masculinity theory as being too enthusiastic about some of the indicators of changing masculinities. For example, in the way inclusivity is measured by a new equity in consumer items such as the man-bag and pink clothing for men.

Similarly, the twist in the story of the bromance video highlights the limits to inclusivity, with homophobia structuring the way men are able to hug (you’ll have to watch to the end to see what we’re talking about). As with critiques of inclusive masculinity that fail to recognise inequalities in gender relations, in the video we see how within contemporary masculinities heteronormativity and homophobia still need to be negotiated, and homosexual love denied, echoing a supposedly bygone era of a love that dare not speak its name (see Lord Alfred Douglas’ 1894 poem Two Loves).

Girl power: Running the World

Run the world (Girls): https://youtu.be/VBmMU_iwe6U

Ways of understanding girls and women have also changed dramatically in the last few decades. Where women were once expected to have a trajectory of marriage, children and domestic responsibilities, today women experience new expectations and aspirations. Young women especially are expected to do well in school, have a career and take an active role in public life (Harris, 2004). Women have greater choice regarding motherhood, they have an expanded choice of careers and opportunities for success, and they are permitted into spaces, such as pubs and other public spaces in the evening that would previously have made them ‘questionable’ (see Griffin et al., 2013). These new found freedoms would at first, like ‘inclusive’ masculinity, seem to be something to celebrate. Women appear to have gained a new mobility and a range of choices in how they live their lives, many of which have been the result of feminist activity. But when interrogated, these freedoms are more problematic than they first seem, and are as closely tied to consumerism as they are to feminism. To think about these issues we start by looking at recent representations of sexiness in the media.

In Beyonce’s music video for Run the World (Girls), we have a representation of femininity that on the surface appears to appeal to feminism. Women are presented as a tribal force, and are collectively responsible for running the world. In the video, Beyonce

and her ‘girl’ gang face off with a police force of men in riot gear. With Beyonce at the helm, these women are able to march on their male counterparts.

Beyonce’s Run the World video is derivative of ‘girl power’ discourses. Girl power was a key gear change in thinking about femininity, emerging in the 1990s as a popular call for a new generation of women. Girl power borrowed from riot grrrl, a punk movement that blended feminist concerns with rape culture, abortion and ownership of the body with an aesthetic that was both feminine or ‘girly’ and ‘tomboy-ish’ in appearance (e.g. lacy dresses and Doc Martin boots). But where the riot grrrl movement attempted to re-appropriate sexist language, for example in claiming ownership of the term ‘slut’, girl power tied femininity to particular consumer practices, girlfriend cultures and heterosexuality (Attwood 2007, Gillis & Munford 2004).

Girl power was a key trope for the popular Spice Girls pop group. In 1996, the Spice Girls released their first single Wannabe. The sentiment of Wannabe was heteronormative, in that it can be assumed that the women singers were addressing a male who might ‘wanna be my lover’. It also demanded that any potential relationship was predicated on the man ‘get[ting] with my friends’, so emphasising forms of female friendship and camaraderie that borrowed from feminist notions of sisterhood between women (Winch 2013).

Critiques saw girl power as an appropriation of feminism that sold the ideals of feminism back to girls in middle-class, heterosexual and feminine ways that did not challenge gender relations (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991; Driscoll, 1999, Reay, 2010). In particular, it reasserted traditional femininity by tying these new emerging femininities to appearance related consumerism. The Spice Girls, for example, had their own merchandise catalogue, to account for the full range of products that could be bought under the rubric of girl power.

The emergence of girl power discourse occurred alongside a wave of pro-women government policy that sought to address women’s inclusion in, for example, health and education. A contemporary instance of this is the 2012 EU Commission campaign ‘Science, It’s a Girl Thing’. Intended to increase young women studying sciences in schools, the campaign came with a promotional video that incorporated the main tenets of girl power discourses. The video associates science with girls, girl friendships, makeup, consumption (e.g. chemistry goggles as just one of many glasses accessories) and attracting handsome men’s attention (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj--FFzngUk).

While the video itself was removed due to complaints from the scientific community and beyond[1], the website maintains elements of girl power. A camera phone takes a

1 A similar debate took place in 2015, when the scientist Tim Hunt made a series of comments around the problems of women in the laboratory, including the claim that they too often fell in love or cried. Female scientists responded with the #distractinglysexy hashtag.

picture of three female friends, which is turned, in the camera phone's screen, into three women in lab coats (see http://science-girl-thing.eu/en). Like the Spice Girls' notions of sisterhood, this promotion of women to the sciences draws on the idea that female friendship is at the heart of women's entry into previously male-dominated professions (Winch, 2013). Moreover, the campaign represents women's barriers to educational and employment successes not in terms of institutional or structural sexism, but in the girl's own perceived lack of feminine roles in the sciences. By shining a light on femininity, and tying femininity to science, the 'Science, It's a Girl Thing' campaign effectively deals with gender inequality by enlightening its viewer to the already feminine components of science, such as in the associations of makeup with chemistry and the possibility to snag a handsome professional man.

Critical and feminist psychologists have recently turned to the concept of a postfeminist sensibility to help make sense of these shifts in femininity that emphasises independence, agency and free choice, while at the same time remaining reassuringly feminine. The term 'postfeminism' has been heavily debated (e.g. as an anti-feminist backlash, theoretical feminist position, or an era after feminism), but here we draw on the work of McRobbie (2009) and Gill (2007).

Gill's (2007) concept of a postfeminist sensibility denotes a set of ideas that produce a contemporary way of thinking about gender: a discursive regime, evident in both the media and people's sense making. Gill's postfeminist sensibility includes "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (p. 149). This means that a woman produces herself as a feminine subject through surveying, identifying and then completing work on the body often through consumption practices (e.g. use of hair removal products) so that she can transform her body into a culturally ideal, while understanding this work as something natural (e.g. hairiness is inherently unattractive) and done for herself, as an act of an autonomous, empowered woman unconcerned with men's appreciation.

A postfeminist sensibility is a contradictory one (Gill & Elias, 2014). For example, it is shored up by a normalisation of heterosexuality within wider discourses of inclusivity and equality that might otherwise open up greater experimentation with sexual identities. This 'compulsory heterosexuality' provides the conditions of possibility of, for example, girls and women kissing each other for men's voyeuristic pleasure rather than their own pleasure (Diamond, 2009; Evans & Riley, 2014).

Within a postfeminist sensibility, feminism is taken into account as a valuable standpoint. For example, feminist language of empowerment, choice and individualism evidenced in second wave feminist arguments that women should be economically active and be sexually agentic remain part of a postfeminist sensibility. But within

postfeminism, tying these arguments to feminism as a political movement for social change are absent or actively rejected, either as no longer relevant or because feminism is constructed as having damaging effects on contemporary gender relations, as in an example we gave earlier on equality employment legislation being constructed as discriminatory (Fausto-Stirling, 2003).

Another key component of postfeminist sensibility is its shift from objectification to sexual self-subjectification. In Laqueur's (1990) history of sex, he argues that before the 18th Century it was not believed that women could conceive without orgasm. However, by the end of the Enlightenment it was known that women could conceive even when unconscious, creating the possibility that, for women, conception and passion could be separated and thus female sexuality was potentially passionless. This set the scene for new understandings of ideal femininity that came to dominate notions of female sexuality for the following centuries, where women's sexuality was constructed as passive and an object for the pleasures of men (see also McFadden, this volume). Part of the second wave feminist movement was to challenge these notions of passive female sexuality, arguing that women should not be objects of men's desire but subjects who could enjoy an active sexuality. These arguments were subsequently taken up within postfeminist sensibility, creating new subject positions such as being sexually savvy and 'up for it'.

But analysts of postfeminist sensibility have several concerns. First, the always up for it hyper-sexuality of postfeminism reproduces a male heterosexual fantasy but through a discourse of autonomy: that women are doing it for themselves (Harvey & Gill, 2011; Evans & Riley, 2013). Second, although postfeminism celebrates diversity and individualism through its girl power standpoint (that women can do anything they set their minds to), how women take up new sexual subjectivities is radically shaped by class, sexuality, and ethnicity that privileges white, middle class women. We can see this in the media and wider public treatment of women on the reality television programme 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding'. While being 'up for it' might now be an acceptable performance of femininity for middle-class women, the 'not-quite-white' gypsy becomes a national symbol of disgust and excess (Jensen & Ringrose, 2013). Similarly, Skeggs (2005) notes that discussions of vibrator ownership may be evidence of sexual liberation for the middle-class Sex and the City characters, but the same talk by working class women on a hen night holds a different cultural value (For more discussion on class and new femininities, see Storr (2003) on Ann Summers parties; Bailey, Griffin and Shankar (2015) on the night-time economy; and Ringrose and Walkerdine (2003) in relation to makeover programmes).

We can see how privileging of white middle-class aesthetic is maintained by considering Beyonce, Kylie Minogue and Pippa Middleton. In 2012 the media presented Kate Middleton and Prince William's wedding as a moment of national pride and evidence of the meaningfulness of love and romance. But the backside of Kate's sister, Pippa Middleton, also took up a significant amount of media and public discussion,

including the creation of the Facebook group 'Pippa Middleton ass appreciation society'. In the context of a traditional, if highly mediated, 'white' wedding, the festishization and sexualisation of Pippa Middleton's bottom was largely unremarkable: indeed its location as a sexy object at the intersection of upper-middle class whiteness remained invisible. As McCabe argued, in her "buttermilk body-skimming gown", Kate Middleton's sister "seductively embodie[d] a type of feminine empowerment that is completely digestible" (2011: 355-356). In contrast to non-white celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez, Pippa was not asked to extol her own pride in her body or her ethnicity, neither was it suggested that her curvy backside had any relationship to her sexual appetite.

A similar observation of celebrity's 'sexy bums' is suggested in Railton and Watson's (2005) comparisons of Kylie Minogue, Beyonce and Rihanna. Railton and Watson (2005) suggest that Beyonce's video for Baby Boy (see https://youtu.be/8ucz_pm3LX8) is exemplary of the representation of sexy black female celebrity through associations with an excessive and dangerous sexuality. Variously located in the jungle, by the sea, on the beach (we can make similar observations in relation to her more recent music videos for Drunk in Love), her body is affected and moved by the environment, with her body, backside and hair shown in constant, often uncontrollable, movement. In contrast, Minogue's video for Can't Get You Out of My Head is clinical, clean, light and white. Her sexiness is controlled through the use of slow motion techniques that work to manage the body's movement: this body does not writhe, roll, crawl, or get covered in sand or water in the same way that Beyonce's does. Comparing the two celebrities' use of the body in performance allows for an analysis of the way a postfeminist sensibility is imbricated with older, colonial discourses of black women's sexuality. Indeed, analysis of postfeminism suggests that a range of traditional sexist and racist discourses run in parallel with postfeminism, so that in taking up postfeminist subject positions women are vulnerable to symbolic and physical violence of being read through more traditional gendered discourses.

Applying critical perspectives

Critical approaches to gender allow researchers to offer more nuanced analyses that engage with the complexities of contemporary gender identities (e.g. Evans & Riley, 2014; Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Dobson & Harris, 2015; Spencer & Doull, 2015; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). These complexities inform new practices and more ethical (and sometimes more difficult) ways of thinking and behaving. Taking up and making these critical approaches to gender your own might even mean becoming like Sara Ahmed's 'wilful subjects'. In her empirical research on the wilful subject, Ahmed's (2012) interviews with diversity practitioners provides evidence of the silencing effects of regular eye rolls and other's exasperation when raising important issues about gender inequality, racism or harassment. In her discussion of the 'feminist killjoy' (2010), she

shows how identifying as a feminist is often understood as getting in the way of other people's enjoyment or happiness (see more on her blog at http://feministkilljoys.com).

In our own teaching practice, supporting student's research and thinking about critical gender approaches has allowed us to question their (and our) place in the world. For example, we've had students reflecting deeply on where their ideas about using porn or wearing makeup come from. Such approaches in the classroom draw on feminist practices, such as consciousness-raising. In another instance, one dissertation student who identified as feminist spent a year making self-reflexive field notes on other student's reactions to her feminist sentiments, identifying a deep mistrust and trivialisation of her views. And in Fahs' (2012) classroom practice, she asked her female students to grow out their body hair and male students to shave it all. The kind of self-awareness created by such tasks is important as it allows people to think deeply about and act on issues of equality, inclusion, liberation, empowerment and appearance-related concerns. The National Union of Students has been particularly keen to take on these issues at a campus level, especially in reaction to the repercussions of 'lad culture' (Phipps & Young 2015, see also http://www.nus.org.uk/en/lifestyle/lad-culture-a-gender-issue/).

Critical approaches to gender also allow us to explore where activism may be most useful, as well as the limits to activism. For example, Edell, Brown and Tolman's (2013) work with SPARK (Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge) explored some of the contradictions of activism (e.g. young women engaging in appearance-related activism in heels) and the need for more intergenerational and intersectional activism to help challenge whose voices get heard. For more examples, see Michael Conroy's A Call to Men programme supporting boys and men to critically evaluate Lad Culture (www.acalltomenuk.org.uk) and Ringrose and Renold's (2012) work on the potential conscious raising and limitations of the SlutWalks.

Current trends

New and exciting emerging areas include work on the impact of postfeminism on masculinities, the role of social media and globalisation, and aesthetic labour. Each of these demonstrates the complexity of new gendered subjectivities, and the creative ways that researchers are making sense of them.

In earlier sections we described how a 'crisis of masculinity' discourse emerged in part as a response to second wave feminism. But there is limited work on how postfeminism, with its simultaneous drawing on and refuting of feminism, impacts on men and masculinities. Work on how a postfeminist sensibility shapes the kinds of subjectivities that men can take up, and how these fall in line with current social, political, economic and cultural structures is relatively absent, as O'Neill (2014, p.18) argues "it is a struggle to identify any work within this field [of masculinity studies] that

examines postfeminism as a social and cultural context that shapes masculinity formations, relations, and practices". Evan's blog about TubeCrush (a site where straight women and gay men upload non-consented pictures they've taken of attractive men on public transport) highlights some relevant directions that an analysis of the impact of postfeminism on men might take. This includes consideration of the complexities of power and gender relations and the way intimacies and desires orient around particular male bodies and the entrepreneurial citizen-worker http://www.cost-ofliving.net/tubecrush-privacy-sexism-and-consent-in-the-digital-age/.

As Adrienne's TubeCrush example shows, one of the spaces where we might expect to see emerging work on masculinity is online, in the new forms of communities and relationships emerging from a digital context and in the way that online communication creates new forms of embodiment (see for example Mowlabocus (2010) and Dowsett et al.'s (2008) research on masculinity and 'hook up' apps). These spaces also contain new and exciting trends in terms of the changing nature of femininity.

In our own research, we explored ways that digital spaces inform the performance of transnational femininities that are influenced by a postfeminist sensibility. We looked at the living doll movement in which women achieve the appearance of being a doll through various techniques such as wide rimmed contact lenses, hair extensions, corsetry; and possibly photo-editing technologies and/or surgery (Evans & Riley, 2016). In analysing the online performance of one particular doll, Anastasiya Shpagina, we explored some of the complexities of postfeminism as it reiterates itself at the intersections of Post-Soviet, East Asian and Western constructs of femininity, allowing us to see how the postfeminist tropes with which we are familiar (e.g. the body as a project, the representation of traditional femininity to signify choice, freedom and empowerment, makeover culture) become reiterated in new forms (for example, sexual sassiness is replaced by cuteness). Shpagina's transformations which provide her with a living (e.g. through make up endorsements) highlight components of emerging themes in gender research: new global economies, shifts in available discourses for gendered subjectivity, and new forms of workplace and aesthetic labour, that turn the self into a commodity.

'Aesthetic labour' means more than simply looking attractive as a form of paid labour, but a form of surveillance and self-discipline that is required of all women (Gill & Elias. 2014; Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2016). Through aesthetic labour, we are encouraged to work on ourselves as an expression of our psychological well-being. We can see elements of aesthetic labour in the emergence of 'love your body' discourses. In these mediated discourses, various companies (largely from the beauty and diet industries) demand that women give up on a previous set of ideals that were unattainable, but instead should feel confident about themselves. For example, the recent advertising campaign from Weightwatchers extols women to 'feel incredible':

> You refused to give up trying; you survived school; you did not run from your first kiss; you sought out adventure; you fell out of love, bravely back into it; you said yes to always being there; you stood up for what you believed in; you conquered the impossible daily; you won unwinnable battles […] these are your stories. Never forget how incredible you are (cited in Gill and Elias, 2014 p. 181)

Campaigns such as these appear on the surface to be informed by a range of literature that suggested more feminist-inspired notions of the self, in contrast to a 'media ideal'. However, on closer inspection, we could question why companies would want to suggest that their products are irrelevant. If you love your body regardless of its shape or size, why would you diet?

What new trends in gender research suggest is "an ever deeper and more pernicious regulation of women, that has shifted from *body* as image/project to *psychic life*" (Gill & Elias 2014, p. 185). Such research suggests a new set of expectations being created in discourses that encourage positive self-conceptions. For example, encouragement to talk about the self as confident, as having high self-esteem and 'being happy' creates another normative feminine 'ideal'. Health becomes equated to psychological life, so that women are expected to work on both their bodies and their minds in order to live a culturally constructed 'good life', which paradoxically is nearly impossible to attain (Gill 2007; Riley, Evans & Robson, forthcoming; Thompson & Donaghue, 2014). Linking this to social media, the emergence of the #fitblr community, for example, encourages the project of self-transformation. These narratives of transformation are however inherently contradictory: one slogan, for instance, calls to the reader 'I don't want another girl's body. I want my body, but leaner, stronger and healthier!'

What becomes difficult with these evolving discourses of postfeminism is that they are emotionally charged, so that they are able to latch onto our subjective experience of the world. Who wouldn't want to have body confidence and self-esteem? To feel like a better, more open minded or fashionable man? Or even perhaps, who doesn't want to be a *good person*?

New gender constructs equate terminology that once held out possibilities for social change (such as empowerment, agency, freedom) to the wider power structures of consumerism, neoliberal individualism, sexual difference and sexism. In one sense this slipperiness could leave us feeling unable to provide critique. Indeed, current terms for making sense of this context reflect an ambivalent and difficult terrain: 'impossible spaces', 'cruel optimism' and 'double stagnation' are terms use to describe contemporary gender theorising and subject positions (Evans & Riley, 2014; Griffin et al., 2013; McRobbie, 2015). But complexity and contradictions allows for exciting research. The field of gender is wide open for new research, and new ways of sense making, so that we can continue to question our taken-for-granted ideas of what gender means.

Summary

Traditionally psychologists conceptualised gender as something that we are: a measurable aspect of identity produced by the different biology of male and female bodies, the way the different sexes are socialised, or a combination of both. This thinking is useful for challenging some aspects of sexism, but enables other aspects and doesn't provide a framework for making sense of the complexities of contemporary gender relations that are produced within a consumerism that simultaneously borrows from and undermines social movements like feminism. Drawing on a range of social constructionist and poststructuralist thinkers, we instead suggest a way of thinking about gender as a kind of performance, one that draws on practices of gender that are part of our socio-historic culture, repeating these practices until they come to feel our own. From this perspective gender is something we do: a practice that is interpreted by others. Applying this framework to ideas of hegemonic masculinity and postfeminism, we explored the complexities of contemporary gender analyses and highlighted future directions looking at the impact of postfeminism on masculinities, social media and aesthetic labour.

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